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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1529
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 7333
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 8549
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 4609
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 9854
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 5267
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 011453

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: POLO PARTY DISTANCES ITSELF FROM ARMED STRUGGLE

REF: BOGOTA 11404

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood - Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

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11. (U) Colombia's left-wing Polo Party has established itself as a leftist political alternative (reftel), but is hobbled by links to now defunct guerrilla movements and weak positions on security. Polo leadership has attempted to distance itself from the armed left, and seems to have genuinely embraced a non-violence platform. But the party lacks a strong message on security, a critical issue for the generally right-of-center Colombian electorate. The ELN peace process will be a test of the Polo's position on violence and justice for armed groups. End Summary.

Polo Struggles with Leftist Identity

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12. (C) Polo President Carlos Gaviria, Secretary-General Antonio Navarro Wolff and Bogota Mayor Luis "Lucho" Garzon recognize the continued existence of the armed left in Colombia is a major electoral hurdle. Gallup pollster Jorge Londono estimates that 75% of the Colombian electorate is center or center-right, mostly in rejection to the ELN and FARC. Many voters question the Polo's capacity to handle security issues, and believe some members are sympathetic to leftist armed groups. This perception is exacerbated by the presence of former M-19 guerrillas and Communist Party members within its ranks. Even within the Polo, security is an issue. Wolff, a party founder and former member of the M-19, blames his defeat in the Polo's 2006 presidential primary in large part on his guerrilla past.

Polo Rejects Violence and Armed Struggle

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13. (U) At the party's December Congress, Polo delegates unanimously approved a resolution denouncing "armed struggle" as a legitimate reform strategy and calling on the FARC and ELN to disarm. Shortly before the Congress, Carlos Gaviria condemned the FARC's terrorist actions. The Polo also rebuffed the public overture of Yesid Arteta, a former FARC mid-level leader recently released after ten years in prison, to attend the Polo Congress to "ensure the party remained true to its leftist agenda." Despite Arteta's assertion that his armed struggle was over, Polo leaders made clear he was not welcome because of his FARC ties. Earlier in November, the party sent an open letter to the FARC demanding that the FARC stop threatening community leaders in the Catatumbo region.

14. (C) But the Polo's efforts to distance itself from the

armed left are undercut by its weak message on security. Polo policy documents criticize the government's emphasis on armed action against leftist armed groups and feature vague plans to disarm the FARC and ELN through negotiations. Other parties repeatedly criticized Carlos Gaviria's insistence during the presidential campaign that Colombia's conflicts could only be resolved through talk, not military force. On narcotics issues the Polo discounts extradition and aerial eradication, but provides few suggestions beyond alternative development. Both Gaviria and Wolff recently made public statements denouncing the GOC decision to spray coca crops near the Ecuador border. (Some of this is politics and in private some Polo leaders recognize the need for a tougher line on drugs.)

ELN Peace Process May be Test

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15. (C) The ELN peace process is further testing the Polo's security posture. The party has called for harsh punishment for former paramilitaries, but more lenient treatment for ELN fighters. While Gaviria and Navarro Wolff agree that a complete amnesty for the ELN would be wrong, Daniel Garcia Pena (a guarantor in the ELN peace process and candidate to succeed Navarro Wolff as Polo Secretary General) favors much better benefits for the ELN than the paramilitaries. Gaviria and Navarro Wolff worry that an ELN push for a complete amnesty could split the party. Moreover, all are concerned that in the event the ELN demobilizes, its lack of a viable political base may lead it to try to join forces with the Polo. Polo leaders would likely stress that such a development was made possible by the ELN's disarmament, but Gaviria and Garzon understand it could alienate voters by tying the party to the guerrillas.

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